DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 345 394 EC 301 153

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TITLE Gifted Adolescents and Their Relationships with Family and Peers.
PUB DATE 90
NOTE 19p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Ability Grouping; Adolescents; Females; *Gifted; Grouping (Instructional Purposes); *Parent Student Relationship; *Peer Relationship; Popularity; Secondary Education; Sex Differences; Siblings; *Student Attitudes; *Teacher Student Relationship

ABSTRACT

This paper reviews what is known about the relationships between gifted adolescents and their family members and school associates, and offers some ideas and suggestions to help in improving these relationships. Attitudes of the gifted themselves toward giftedness are considered, noting differences between extremely gifted and moderately gifted students and between the mathematically gifted and the verbally gifted. Social problems during adolescence are addressed, including the variety of reasons for student teasing, special problems for gifted females in balancing their need for achievement and their desire for popularity, and the value of ability grouping in alleviating some of these problems. Aspects of relationships with teachers that are negative (such as gifted students' independence of adult structure) and positive (such as possible mentoring) are discussed, with grouping of gifted students proposed as a way to improve relationships. A section on relationships with parents considers unrealistic expectations, effects of labeling, and problems with non-gifted siblings. Parents are encouraged to avoid perfectionist attitudes, keep lines of communication open, and treat all their children with equality. (DB)

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Gifted Adolescents and Their Relationships With Family and Peers

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Running head: RELATIONSHIPS

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Abstract

Misunderstandings and stereotypes abound in peers' and teachers' attitudes toward gifted students. Parents and siblings also often have difficulty understanding, accepting, and relating to gifted adolescents. This paper examines the relationships between gifted adolescents and their family members and school associates, and it offers some ideas and suggestions toward improving these relationships.

Gifted Adolescents and Their Relationships With Family and Peers

There are a number of common myths and stereotypes about gifted individuals and the way they relate to other people. Two of the most common myths hold that gifted individuals are "nerds," doomed to a life of social rejection, or that the gifted excel in all areas, including socialization, and are destined to be popular. Gifted adolescents seem to have an especially difficult time maintaining a balance between the two extremes, and it appears that mistaken assumptions and unrealistic expectations of others are often to blame.

Peers, teachers, and parents tend to forget that "the only trait common to all gifted children, and one that is missing in all others, is an intellectual potential significantly higher than most of the population" (Miller & Price, 1981, p. 107). Misunderstandings and stereotypes are especially problematic when gifted students are placed in classes with average students.

Gifted Attitudes Toward Giftedness

In order to understand how a gifted adolescent relates with his or her peers, teachers, and parents, one must first examine the individual's own attitude toward his or her giftedness. Kerr, Colangelo, & Gaeth (1988) found that gifted adolescents considered their giftedness to be an advantage in academics and in personal growth but a disadvantage in social situations. Perino & Perino (1981) reported similar findings, namely that gifted adolescents

have high expectations for academic success, but low expectations for social success.

There are, naturally, variations in the intensity of gifted students' feelings and expectations, perhaps relative to the type or level of giftedness. A study conducted by Dauber & Benbow (1990) indicated that extremely gifted students saw themselves as more introverted and inhibited and less socially skilled than did moderately gifted students.

Interestingly, students who were mathematically gifted saw themselves in a more positive light than did the verbally gifted. These differences may exist because mathematical ability is more acceptable in today's technologically oriented society, or perhaps because advanced mathematical ability is less obvious in a social setting, where the sophisticated vocabulary of a verbally gifted individual tends to set him or her apart from others (Dauber & Benbow, 1990).

Relationships With Peers

Pre-adolescence

Current evidence indicates that the social interaction patterns of students change as the students age. Leyden (1985) reports that pre-school children who are gifted have some difficulty finding the proper play group because they become bored or try to take over games with peers. They may try to play with older children, but these attempts are usually not successful because the gifted child is not at the same emotional level as the

older children, even if the intellectual level is the same.

Gifted students are generally well liked by their peers in elementary school, perhaps because they are seen as more helpful than the less intelligent students, who seek help rather than offering it (Heller & Feldhusen, 1986). Luftig and Nichols (1990) found that peer nominations revealed a gap between the popularity of gifted boys and that of gifted girls. The study found that gifted boys were more popular with their classmates than were gifted girls, perhaps because girls were seen as "show-offs" when they demonstrated their intelligence. Such popularity differences between the sexes recur through all levels of school.

Adolescence

Popularity of gifted adolescents among peers and schoolmates is more difficult to evaluate than popularity of younger students because high intelligence students are often placed in the same classes and may have little contact with average intelligence students (Schneider, 1987). Gifted students who do not have classes with other gifted students often feel alienated. Among "the eight great gripes of gifted kids" (Galbraith, 1983, p. 17) are complaints about peers teasing them because they're smart, few friends who really understand them, and feelings of alienation or of being different.

Many lists of characteristics of gifted students include difficult making friends or relating to peers. Galbraith (1983, p. 80) explains that all students sometimes have problems making friends "but many times, the problems [gifted students] face are the direct result of being gifted." Gifted students say they have trouble relating to average intelligence students their own age because they feel different, others are jealous of their grades or abilities, and others don't understand them. They are teased for getting good grades and, alternatively, for not getting good grades (Galbraith, 1983). They are, therefore, in a no-win situation.

Many average intelligence students respond to gifted students with teasing of one form or another. The gifted students usually respond to this teasing by either denying or ignoring the comments (Galbraith, 1983). Denial usually encourages more teasing while silence discourages further attempts at any type of communication, positive or negative.

Although adolescent victims of teasing often do not realize it, there are several main reasons why others tease gifted students, and not all of the reasons are unkind (Galbraith, 1983). Students may tease the gifted because they personally dislike them, but they may also tease because they are jealous or because they feel inferior and want to bring the gifted student down to their level so that they may feel superior. It may be, however, that teasing is actually a revelation of pride at being friends with the gifted student. Adolescents often hesitate to give compliments

for fear of being seen as "goody goody," so teasing may simply be a way of saying "I think you're neat."

During adolescence, popularity and acceptance by peers require the individual to be as much like the group as possible (Perino & Perino, 1981). This includes similarities in dress, appearance, speech, mannerisms, and grades. Most students are not gifted and do not always get good grades, so those who are gifted and do always get good grades have a difficult time gaining peer acceptance. Gifted students often hide their ability in order to appear more similar and acceptable to peers (Hall & Skinner, 1980). Other gifted students decide they cannot satisfactorily relate to students of lower verbal and cognitive abilities and isolate themselves by choice (Freeman, 1979). The first group has problems because they do not develop their full academic potential, while the second group does not develop their social skills.

Gifted females have an especially difficult task in balancing their giftedness and their desire for popularity. Perino & Perino (1981, p. 127) point out that the "requirements necessary for a woman to be considered feminine are contrary to the requirements for successful achievement." Achievement in any area, including academics, is associated with aggressiveness and competitiveness, which are not compatible with the traditional feminine qualities of gentleness and passivity; therefore, many people assume that a successful female cannot be feminine and popular but must be odd and not well liked. Unfortunately, "many gifted girls choose to

pursue the avenue of popularity, relinquishing their academic and career interests" (Perino & Perino, 1981, p. 114).

Possible Solutions

In order for gifted students to enjoy satisfactory relationships with peers without cheating themselves out of academic opportunities, they must learn that their giftedness is not a curse and does not make them "nerds" or "freaks." Perhaps the best way to accomplish this is to put gifted students in classes with other gifted students because "[gifted students] need to be with others of similar interest and ability for at least part of the day" (Galbraith, 1983, p. 99). Thus, their feelings may be validated, and they can share common concerns and discuss relevant issues. They may also serve as intellectual stimulation for each other.

Relationships With Teachers

Negative Aspects

In addition to problems in relationships with peers at school, gifted students may also have difficulty in their relationships with teachers. Gifted students are often able to work without the supervision of a teacher, and they may develop attitudes and manners of independence. "Gifted children are likely to be more independent of adult rule structures than other children. Consequently, they are more likely to be seen as 'difficult' and different, if not actually deviant" (Freeman, 1979, p. 27).

Many of the problems teachers have with gifted students stem from a basic difference between the teachers' expectations and reality. According to Galbraith (1983), one of the most often heard complaints of gifted students is that teachers expect them to be perfect and to do their best at all times. Freeman (1985) states that most teachers expect gifted students to excel in all areas of development, to excel in all subjects, to be highly motivated, and to have a positive attitude toward school.

Teachers often expect gifted students to demonstrate high levels of emotional maturity (self-control, independence, adaptability, and responsibility), social maturity, and in some cases even physical maturity (Freeman, 1985). Students may be advanced in any or all of these areas, or they may not be advanced in any of these areas. Advanced intellect is not automatically a sign of advancement in any other aspect of an individual's development. It may also occur that a student will be gifted in writing and reading but not in math and science, or the reverse may be true (Freeman, 1985). Other students may be gifted in music or art but not in academic subjects. Teachers, however, often expect gifted students to excel in all areas of the curriculum, and these expectations can cause conflicts and misunderstandings in the classroom.

Many teachers expect gifted students to possess what Freeman (1985) refers to as the common triad of giftedness: intellectual ability, creativity, and task commitment. Not every gifted student

possesses all three of these characteristics, and a lack of one or both of the latter traits in not necessarily an indication of abnormality. Task commitment may be lacking simply because the gifted child has simply not found a sufficiently intriguing area of interest and is bored by the tasks he or she is given.

In some cases, the teacher may feel threatened by the student's intellectual abilities and may tease, ignore, or be openly hostile to him or her. The student may also be bored by the class and become a discipline problem by frequent talking to fellow classmates during class or by openly challenging every point the teacher makes in a lecture. Tension is sure to result and may cause problems between the teacher and other students in the class or between the gifted student and the other students. Other students may adopt the teacher's negative attitude toward the gifted student and tease, belittle, or alienate him or her. Conversely, other students may copy the gifted student's disruptive or disrespectful behavior, resulting in a difficult group for the teacher to handle.

Positive Aspects

Not all teacher-gifted student relationships, however, are negative. Teachers may enjoy having a student of high intelligence and may enjoy helping to develop that intelligence. Students may find a mentor in a teacher and be encouraged to concentrate on schoolwork and other ways of developing their potential. A teacher may also provide gifted students with simply someone whom they can

talk to comfortably because he or she is closer to their own intellectual level than are the students' classmates.

In another type of situation, the teacher may assign independent study to the student because he or she is capable of handling it, and the teacher is too overworked to give the student any individual attention (Leyden, 1985). This may be effective because the student is able to progress at his or her own pace, but he or she will not receive the interaction and stimulation necessary for full development of his or her potential.

Possible Solutions

Gifted students can develop satisfactory relationships with teachers if they are respectful and the teachers understand what to reasonably expect from them. Freeman (1979, p. 27) points out that "gifted children are obliged to balance a fine tightrope between adult expectations and their own surges of independent thinking," but this tightrope may be made more stable if the teacher has reasonable, modifiable expectations and the student shows understanding and respect for the teacher.

As is the case with peer relationships, it appears that the best way to ensure smooth relationships between gifted students and their teachers is to group the gifted students in classes together. The teachers of these special classes should be trained in the education of the gifted so that they know what to expect and how to best instruct the students.

Relationships With Parents

Unrealistic Expectations

Another frequent complaint of gifted adolescents is that their parents expect them to be perfect (Galbraith, 1983). Parents seem to forget that gifted adolescents have the same problems and concerns as most other adolescents. Gifted adolescents often seem to be more mature than they really are because they possess advanced vocabularies and speech patterns, so parents may not see the problems they are going through. "Verbal facility is often a mask for an insecure youth, who may be hiding conflicts behind a verbal haze" (Perino & Perino, 1981, p. 115).

Adolescence is a time of frequent conflicts between parents and their children, gifted or not. Adolescents are trying to break away from their parents and gain some independence, while parents may try to keep them close. Gifted adolescents often find that their parents expect too much of them during this time. Seemingly irresponsible activities may actually be typical of the child's age group (Perino & Perino, 1981).

There are several common reasons parents expect too much from their gifted children. As mentioned previously, some parents forget that although their children act like adults, they are not adults. Some parents see their children's accomplishments as a reflection of their own ability as parents and constantly push their children to excel. Other parents try to live vicariously through their children, while others are gifted themselves and have

no tolerance for failure (Galbraith, 1983).

Labeling

Parents who use the label gifted in reference to their children may be causing problems for the children. In a study conducted by Cornell (1989, p. 59), "children whose parents refrained form using the term 'gifted' enjoyed higher peer status, more positive self-concepts, and lower anxiety levels than did children whose parents used the term." It should be noted, however, that using the label is not the same as thinking of the child as gifted (Cornell, 1989). No harm comes of thinking of a gifted child as gifted, provided one's expectations of the child's abilities are realistic.

Non-gifted Siblings

If one child in a family is gifted and others are not, a potential problem exists. Non-gifted children tend to react negatively to a gifted sibling (Heller & Feldhusen, 1986). Parents may worry that if they silence the gifted child, he or she will feel stifled and repressed, but if they do not, the non-gifted siblings may be resentful (Freeman, 1985).

Non-gifted siblings are often jealous of the gifted child's abilities and the amount of attention he or she receives. Gifted children generally respond to their non-gifted siblings either by ridiculing and teasing about their "stupidity," or by showing support and affection without lording their own intelligence (Miller & Price, 1981).

Possible Solutions

Parents should carefully monitor their behavior toward their gifted children, keeping in mind that no child is perfect. They should be aware of their children's goals, activities, and problems and should avoid pushing the children to do what the parents expect of them. They also need to be understanding when their children are not successful. Shaughnessy & Heacock (1985, p. 23) explain that failure is difficult for gifted children to accept because "their standards are typically higher [than those of average children] and parental expectations are often unrealistic."

Praise is important, but it must be sincere and deserved, not "good, another A" (Miller & Price, 1981). Perfectionistic attitudes should be avoided, and the lines of communication should always be open so that parents may better understand and facilitate their children's development.

Parents must also remember that average siblings may seem to be "dumb" compared to older or younger gifted siblings (Freeman, 1985). Shaughnessy & Heacock (1985, p. 23) caution that "parents should be careful not to 'show off' their [gifted] children ... On the other hand, parents should attend their children's activities. Parents should strive to treat all of their children with equality, to avoid hurt feelings and resentment.

Summary and Conclusions

Gifted adolescents often consider themselves to be good at academics but poor at social skills. They are often subjected to teasing from fellow students at school and, unless they attempt to hide their ability, may be alienated or rejected because of their intelligence or high grades. Gifted females often have an especially difficult time balancing intelligence and popularity and often "play dumb" so that they will feel liked and accepted by their peers.

Teachers may have unrealistic expectations of gifted students, which can cause problems in the classroom for the teacher, gifted student, and other students in the class. Some teachers, however, are pleased to have highly intelligent students and become mentors, encouraging students to strive to reach their full academic potential.

Outside the classroom, gifted adolescents may have problems with their parents and siblings. Parents tend to expect too much of their gifted children, and non-gifted siblings are often resentful of the gifted child's grades and intelligence as well as the attention he or she receives for these abilities.

Parents can help their gifted children develop socially in a healthy manner. Classes in which gifted students are grouped with other gifted students are beneficial for lessening tensions the students feel between themselves and their peers. Teachers of these special classes should be trained in education of the gifted

and have realistic expectations. If such classes are not offered in a child's school, parents and/or teachers should make an effort to have an effective gifted program started.

Parents should carefully monitor their own attitudes and behaviors toward their gifted children. They must always be careful to encourage their children without expecting too much and must always be supportive. Care must be taken to support all children equally so non-gifted siblings do not become resentful of the gifted child.

Surrounded by the proper environment of caring, understanding, and support, gifted children can be encouraged to develop their intellectual and interpersonal skills. Through combined efforts of teachers, parents, and the children themselves, gifted children can reach their full academic and social potential and lead balanced lives.

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